

Handwerker Gingerbread House
865 No. Thomas Street
Memphis
Shelby County
Tennessee

HABS No. TN-169

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C.

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HANDWERKER GINGERBREAD PLAYHOUSE

HABS No. TN-169

Location: 865 North Thomas Street, Memphis, Shelby County, Tennessee.

Latitude: 35° 09' 54"
Longitude: 90° 02' 13.5"

Significance: John V. Handwerker had this small Victorian playhouse built for his children in the 1890s. It was modelled after the stables which also stood on the property. Much enlarged with additions of 1904 and 1928, the little building has served commercial functions since 1904. Today it stands deserted and isolated. The original portion of the house was of a sophisticated design, employing details and materials found in and on larger Victorian frame buildings.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1891-92.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The following chain of title may be established through the Register of Deeds and Will Books of Shelby County.

1857 Deed July 15, 1857, recorded July 21, 1857 in
Book 29 page 582 (1/2 acre - \$300.00)
James Roark

to

John George Handwerker (trustee) and Agnes Helbing

1891 Deed October 10, 1891, recorded October 26, 1891 in
Book 204 page 621 (861-5 Thomas St. - \$2000.00)
Agnes (Handwerker) Helbing and John George Handwerker
(trustee)

to

John V. Handwerker, Sr. (her brother)

1928 Will October 29, 1904, recorded March 27, 1928 in
Will Book 38 page 376
John V. Handwerker, Sr.

to

His children equally

1972 Playhouse donated to Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities by the heirs of John V. Handwerker, Sr.

4. Original plans and construction: The one-room playhouse was built in imitation of a large carriage house, which included stable and groom's quarters. It was later enlarged by the addition of two rooms in 1904 and 1928.

B. Historical Context: Dr. John V. Handwerker, Sr. was a doctor and a pharmacist. In 1904 Dr. Handwerker had a foot amputated. At this time he abandoned his downtown drugstore, added a second room to the playhouse, installed a basin, and conducted his business there. After Dr. Handwerker's death in 1928, the family house was occupied by his daughter, Miss Agnes Handwerker. She added a bathroom to the playhouse and rented it to two girls as an apartment. At a later date the building housed a beauty parlor.

On the night following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the neighborhood was subjected to general rioting, and most of the windows in the playhouse were broken. After this event it was boarded up and was not used again until 1972, when the children of Dr. John V. Handwerker, Sr. donated it to the Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities. It was moved to the Lee-Fontaine grounds, east of Orleans and south of Washington Street, where it was to be restored for adaptive use.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The playhouse's most important architectural feature is its exterior - there are a hexagonal turret with a pyramidal roof, decorative fretwork and pattern wall and roof shingles. Interior features include a dado-like wall and a cove ceiling.

2. Condition of fabric: Deteriorated but salvageable.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 33'-11" north to south; 12'-4" east to west (the front faces east). There are three buildings, each rectangular, laid out along an east-west axis; all three buildings are one story in height.

2. Foundations: The original foundations are of red brick (2" x 4" x 8"); brick piers support the rear additions.

3. Walls: The entire building is of frame construction, sheathed with horizontal wood board siding painted white. On the original (front) portion of the building the siding has 4-1/2" to the weather with an ogee curve at the bottom of the board. The additions (center and rear) have plain board siding with 5" to the weather. The exception to the latter is on the east side of the center addition. On this exterior surface the siding, as well as the trim, is similar to that on the original building, indicating the probability that the materials were reused when the west wall of the original building was removed. The east gable (original building) has a panel infill of wood shingles in various shapes. There is a dado at the lower portion of the original building. These boards are 3-1/2" wide (1/2 flat; 1/2 reeded). There is a flat wood board trim at the corners of the building and where the wall meets the soffit.
4. Structural system: 2 "x 4" frame wall, 5" thick.
5. Stoops: On the east front, there are two concrete steps (4" x 9-1/2"; 5" x 9-1/2") with a total of three risers to the house floor which is 14" above grade at this point. On the south side there is one wooden step, with a total of two risers to the floor level.
6. Chimneys: There is no chimney on the original portion of the playhouse. The only chimney on the building is located along the ridge of the center addition of the building, 15-1/2" from the west edge of the roof. It is 18" square and has a 10" square flue. The chimney is brick covered with stucco. It stands 2'-8" above the ridge.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The door on the east front of the building is a replacement. It is a hollow core door 2'-8" x 6'-8" x 1-3/4" with a diamond shaped glass panel. There is a 4" plain board trim around this door as well as all other openings. On the south side there is a four-panel door (two vertical panels over two more). It measures 3' x 6'-8" x 1-3/8" with panels of 11" x 43" over 11" x 19".
 - b. Windows: On the south side there are two windows, one in the original structure and one in the center addition. The latter appears to have been moved from the west side of the original structure when the addition was built. These windows are double-hung and measure 29" x 77" with four vertical lights (two over two) of 12" x 30". On the north side there are three windows. The one in the original portion is similar to those described for the south side. Two in the center

addition are larger than the rest. They are double-hung and measure 29" x 77" with four vertical lights (two over two) of 14" x 35-1/2". The window on the west rear is boarded up; it measures 28" x 53-1/2" and appears to have been double-hung. On three sides of the turret at the southeast corner of the original building are windows of fixed sash. The lower panel of clear glass measures 16 3/8" wide x 31-1/4" high. The upper panel contains a clear glass panel surrounded by fourteen 4" lights of colored glass (7" high x 4" across).

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: There is a gable roof on each of the three building elements; the gables are on the east and west ends. The center roof is the highest; that on the west end is the lowest. The roof of the original building is of red painted slate tile of various shapes laid out in pattern. It is topped with a sheet metal fretwork along the ridge. The center roof has a raised seam sheet metal surface, painted red. The rear roof is of rolled asphalt.
- b. Cornice, eaves: There are 9-1/2" overhangs at the eaves of the roofs at the gable ends. A cut wood fretwork of the same configuration as the ridge work is found on the original building at the eaves and gables. It is also used on the east gable of the center addition (probably reused from original building). The soffits follow the roof slope. The belt courses are board cut with dentils.
- c. Turret: There is a shingled turret of hexagonal plan located in the southeast corner of the original building. It has a roof of red painted slate tiles with various shapes. White painted slate tiles are used on the gable ends. A sheet metal ornament tops the pyramidal roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: There are three rooms laid out along an east-west axis. The original building is at the east end and two additions were made. The center room is the widest and has a closet at the northwestern end.

Sizes: original room - 9'-2" x 7'-3"
center room - 15'-3" x 11'-4" (1904)
rear room - 10'-0" x 6'-4" (1928)

There are no stairways within the building, it being a single story structure.

2. Flooring: The floor surface is linoleum laid atop a plywood subfloor in the original building and atop 3-1/2" boards in the additions.

3. Wall and ceiling finish: In the original building the walls and ceilings are finished with 3-1/2" vertical boards similar to those on the exterior dado. There is an angled cove ceiling corresponding to the slope of the roof. In the additions the walls and ceilings are of wood lath and plaster. There is a base molding in the center room.
4. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The closet door in the northwestern part of the center addition is 2'-8" x 6'-8" x 1-3/8" having two 9-1/2" x 39-1/2" panels over two 9-1/2" x 19" panels. The door between the middle and rear rooms is 2'-8" x 6'-8" x 1-3/8" with a 23-3/4" x 34" glass panel over three 23-3/4" horizontal panels. The opening between the original building and the middle room measures 6'-7 3/4" x 6'-9". It has no door.
5. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: There was evidently no heating equipment in the original building, and while no heating equipment exists at present, there appears to have been a gas stove at the rear of the middle room.
 - b. Lighting: Electric lighting was added later.
 - c. Plumbing: A bathroom was added in the rear room.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Interview: Interview conducted with John V. Handwerker, Jr. on September 1972.
- B. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Property records. Register of Deeds and Will Books of Shelby County (no address given).

2. Secondary and published sources:

Newspaper article:

"Interest Takes Spurt in Gingerbread House," Memphis Commercial Appeal (February 6, 1972).

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This 1972 project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) in cooperation with the Tennessee Historical Commission and the West Tennessee Historical Society. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed by Robert C. Giebner (University of Arizona), project supervisor, and Richard H. Hulan, project historian (Nashville), with architects James D. Skelton (University of Illinois) and Mark D. Frederickson (University of Arizona) and student architects Darrell K. Pattison (University of Cincinnati) and John P. Vergos (University of Tennessee) at the Memphis, Tennessee field office on the campus of Memphis State University.

The photographs of the structure were taken in March 1974 by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer.

The written data was edited in the Summer of 1985 by Susan McCown, HABS staff historian in the Washington, D.C. office, for transmittal to the Library of Congress.